

ADULT EDUCATION IN THE URBAN CONTEXT: SERVING LOW INCOME URBAN COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

A review of the literature on “urban education” reveals that the urban context is considered an important determinant of practice for K-12 teachers and administrators located in urban schools. Several professional journals, such as, the Journal of Urban History, the Urban Education Review, Urban Education, and others routinely publish articles that address research, theory, policy, and practice concerns of K-12 urban professionals. Yet there is a dearth of literature that addresses the issues and concerns faced by adult education professionals in urban communities.

Introduction

The urban context represents the social and environmental situations that inform the lived experiences of individuals, groups, and communities that reside in densely populated urban areas. These everyday experiences differ for adult learners based on their sociodemographic characteristics, such as age (or life-stage), income and socioeconomic standing, occupation (or work situation), and other factors. Context is vitally important for urban adult education because it tends to create physical, psychological, and sociocultural distance between and among learners and various providers of adult and continuing education programs, thereby creating barriers and the differential provision of adult learning opportunities for some urban populations. The urban space that often separates learners from those who could assist them is thereby problematic for adult education professionals. For example, it is not uncommon for learners from poor disenfranchised racially segregated inner-city communities to rely on educational programs and services that are provided by teachers, administrators, counselors, and other staff who grew up in middle class, predominantly White, suburban communities. However, the urban context can also present tremendous opportunities for human intellectual growth, development and learning; and for individuals and communities to develop their economic potential.

In this paper, the term urban recognizes the population density attribute described by the U.S. Census Bureau. However, much of the focus is on a much more targeted geographic area called the inner city. This perspective recognizes that urban areas represent densely populated urban centers dominated by skyscrapers that symbolize the tremendous wealth and prosperity of some urban dwellers, yet they stand in sharp contrast and are often in proximity to inner-city communities that are sometimes populated by the poorest of the poor. Both of these communities share an economic relationship with the wealthy and highly educated residents of surrounding suburbs.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the characteristics of the urban context that help to shape the form, content, and scope of adult education programs in urban areas, particularly as these characteristics affect inner-city communities. Several topics will be discussed: urban context and the web of mutually reinforcing barriers to adult education, and the characteristics and attributes of urban adult education programs that target resource-rich communities as contrasted with those that target resource-poor communities.

Urban Context Barriers to Adult Education

Modern urban centers share several socio-structural characteristics that affect the type and quality of adult education that is provided to the various individuals and communities that reside within their borders. A primary characteristic is the interlocking patterns of racial and income discrimination that has become synonymous with urban living. This discriminatory practice is most noticeable in residential segregation that is driven by a mutually reinforcing chain of events: White racial prejudice, housing market discrimination, labor market discrimination, and resulting interracial economic disparities (Galster and Keeney, 1988; Wilson, 1987).

Housing Market Discrimination

Galster and Keeney (1988) observed that White racial prejudice is reflected in the decisions of individuals, families, employers, and communities regarding the extent to which they will affiliate with individuals and groups that differ in their race and ethnicity. In urban communities, the effects of racial prejudice are most pronounced in the Housing market discrimination that has resulted from differential treatment of clientele by housing market agents who may discriminate out of fear of reaction from prejudiced White clientele whom they serve (Galster and Keeney, 1988). A measure of White prejudice was observed by Hacker (1992) who indicated that most American cities have neighborhoods whose residents are largely working and almost exclusively White. He observed that most of these enclaves have made efforts to preserve their character by doing everything necessary, such as arson, gunfire, and other means of intimidation to assure that Black families will not move in. Also, until the passage of the federal Fair Housing Act in 1968, this form of discrimination was so ingrained in the American culture, that the federal government itself redlined in the granting of home mortgages under the Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration, enforced racially restrictive covenants placed on deeds in new subdivisions, funded racially segregated housing projects, and supported urban renewal projects that displaced low-income residents (Quinn and Pawasarat, 2003). Although Galster and Keeney (1988) note that the existence of such discrimination has been well documented, a recent study by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (that is, Turner, et. al., 2002) found that significant levels of racial and ethnic discrimination in both rental and sales markets of urban areas nationwide. Their study of 4,600 paired tests (that is, with one racial minority applicant and one White homeseeker) in 23 metropolitan areas nationwide uncovered countless instances of illegal discrimination against minority homeseekers. This type of discriminatory practice is problematic because it raises the costs of the search for housing, creates barriers to homeownership and housing choice, and contributes to the perpetuation of residential segregation.

Residential Segregation

Housing market discrimination produces residential segregation of neighborhoods on the basis of race, ethnicity, and income. Sociologists have tracked residential segregation via an analysis of segregation indexes since the 1950s (Quinn and Pawasarat, 2003). The historic dissimilarity segregation index most commonly used today to rank metropolitan areas and cities as to their degree of segregation was first published in 1965. Segregation was defined as the lack of an even distribution of the Black population. Ideally, no neighborhood would be all Black or all White, but would be represented in each neighborhood in approximately the same proportion as the city as a whole.

Quinn and Pawasarat (2003) utilized 2000 Census data to examine residential segregation in the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. They created a new index that used city blocks versus census tracts as the unit of analysis. They found that most metropolitan areas are still

highly segregated. The Black population living on blocks with a predominantly (over 80 percent) Black population made up 41.3 percent of the Black population in the largest metro areas. Conversely, the White population living with a predominantly (over 80 percent) White population made up 66.4 percent of the total White population in the 100 largest metro areas.

In addition, Hacker (1992) suggested race and ethnicity related residential segregation is correlated to family income when he observed that two thirds of poor White Americans live in suburbs or rural areas. However, their homes are less likely to be clustered together in slum neighborhoods. Among the poor White families who do live in urban areas, less than a quarter of them reside in low-income tracts, which suggests there are few White ghettos. However, about 70 percent of urban Black households below the poverty line are concentrated in low-income neighborhoods. Residential segregation works to create enclaves of communities (i.e., distinct urban spaces e.g., low-income communities, barrios, ghettos, gated communities, and etc.) based upon race, ethnicity, income, and concomitant values and perspectives.

Social Isolation and Economic Transformation

Another by-product of segregated housing is social isolation. Central city communities became socially isolated during the 1970s and 80s. During this period cities were transformed from centers of production and distribution of goods to centers of administration, finance, and information exchange. Blue-collar jobs were replaced in part by knowledge-intensive white-collar jobs requiring employees, e.g., managers, professionals, and high-level technical and administrative personnel with educational credentials that excluded many with less than a high school diploma. Also, industrial plants experienced decentralization and the flight of manufacturing jobs abroad, to the Sunbelt states, or to the suburbs (Kasarda, 1989, and Wilson, 1987). As a consequence, inner-city communities were plagued by massive joblessness, flagrant and open lawlessness, and low-achieving schools. The residents of these areas, whether women and children of welfare families or aggressive street criminals, tended to become socially isolated from mainstream patterns of behavior (Wilson, 1987). Greer (1989) suggested that the socio-economic and cultural processes that produced urban spaces, e.g., low-income communities, barrios, and ghettos, tend to become self-sealing, as the inhabitants of the neighborhood have for sources of information only those much like themselves. Meanwhile, Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites of each specific class tend to see only social types like themselves, and children growing up in these communities are forced to attend largely segregated K-12 schools.

Segregated Schools

Segregated housing patterns in urban communities have resulted in segregated K-12 schools. It is not uncommon for urban school children to attend schools in which racial minorities constitute more than 50% of the student population (Freeman, et al., 1999). For example, Freeman et al. (1999) observed that during the 1990-1991 school year, 119,539 African American students attended one of Chicago's 203 segregated African American schools—schools in which African American children comprised 99% to 100% of the student population. During the same year, 4,903 Hispanic youngsters attended one of 8 segregated Hispanic schools in Chicago. These schools represented more than 40% of all elementary schools in the Chicago system. Most racially, ethnically, or linguistically diverse schools share three common characteristics: the majority of students come from low-income families, students' academic performance on standardized tests typically falls below state and national norms, and student mobility rates and/or absenteeism are high (Freeman, et al., 1999). One of the effects of attending

underperforming inner-city schools in racially and ethnically segregated communities is an acceptance of alternative language structures.

Alternative Language Structures

Segregated communities and the social isolation of low-income community enclaves, gave rise to alternative language structures in urban areas. Greer (1989) argues that behaviors which would be rare, disliked, and highly visible in a non-urban setting is more commonplace, better organized, and often less stigmatized in cities. These observations seem to capture the language experiences of African Americans and other language minorities in inner-city communities. For example, Flowers (2000) observed that because of the differences existing between the African American dialect and Standard English, the schooling of African Americans in America has negated their language, lived experiences, and culture. The language used among African Americans has been historically characterized as deviant, deficient, and different. She examined Black dialect usage and its function among African American learners in urban adult basic education programs. One of her findings is that the African American adult students did not consider the way they spoke as being different or distinct from Standard English. When asked about and given examples of standard, Black, or slang language, some referred to Black English as Standard English and Standard English as Black English. Therefore, they saw no difference between the two language systems. However, the students did distinguish between Black English, Standard English, and slang. Adult learners who experience difficulty distinguishing between an alternative language system and the dominant language system will likely experience difficulty in a mainstream labor market that views alternative language systems as deviant.

Labor Market Discrimination

As adults, the minority residents from inner-city communities may face Labor market discrimination as they seek employment and economic advancement. This form of discrimination results from employers who may act on their personal prejudices to discriminate against minority workers in the realms of hiring, promotion, retention, and wages. Also, they may discriminate in response to the prejudices of their existing White workers (or customers where workers must interface with clients) to avoid interracial tensions in the workplace that might prove deleterious to productivity (or with sales) (Galster and Keeney, 1988). Hacker (1992) argues that unlike previous years, absolute barriers to employment have been broken, and every occupation has some Blacks among its practitioners. In many areas the numbers remain exceedingly small. For example, Hacker (1992) observed that Blacks remain underrepresented in the professions of engineering, law, medicine, architecture, journalism and others. However, they are overrepresented in jobs that Whites are reluctant to take, such as hotel maids, nursing aids, correctional officers, postal clerks, janitors and cleaners, and others. Blacks seem to be well represented in several occupations, such as, insurance adjusters, bankers, garage workers, chemical technicians, and others.

Given the social isolation experienced by inner-city residents, and the inability of inner-city schools to prepare students for a productive work life, Galster and Keeney (1988) argue that the differences in interracial economic disparities (i.e., differences in occupational attainment, earnings, etc.) between minorities and Whites can be explained at the metropolitan level by interracial differences in the profiles of personal attributes (such as educational attainment and other basic skills, problem-solving ability, decision making, dependability, positive attitude, cooperativeness, and other affective skills and traits) that are evaluated by the labor market, in conjunction with structural features of the market that shape how these attributes are measured.

Such disparities will be exacerbated when labor market discrimination serves to undervalue whatever human capital the minority workforce possesses. Therefore, residents of inner-city communities are caught in a web of mutually reinforcing barriers that significantly inhibit their efforts. Adult and continuing education programs could represent a viable resource to these residents.

Urban Adult Education Programs

In urban centers new and previously unknown forms of learning opportunities emerge, from innovative partnership arrangements with previously unaffiliated organizations to the targeting of specialized groups of learners that can be found in critical masses only in urban areas. However, in most urban centers, the adult and continuing education enterprise has evolved into a bifurcated system to meet the learning and educational needs of urban learners.

Programs Targeting Resource Rich Communities

For middle class adults and their families from predominately White and racially integrated communities, the urban landscape currently offers numerous opportunities for a wide variety of both general and highly specialized learning programs. Numerous providers have evolved in these areas in order to take advantage of the critical mass of urban populations. These providers are able to take advantage of the diversity of interests, needs, abilities, talents, and incomes of such populations to offer courses, workshops, institutes, and other such programs to those individuals, groups, and organizations who can afford to pay for largely fee-based programs. Focused largely on the intellectual growth and personal development needs and wants of targeted clientele, urban residents can find learning opportunities for just about any educational topic within the grasp of human imagination.

As urban areas continue to see the economic advantages of reducing housing segregation, and people from diverse backgrounds continue to congregate in common spaces (such as schools, universities, workplaces, and others), individuals who grew up in segregated communities will be expected to effectively interface with individuals from other races, ethnicities, and cultures. Therefore, there will be an increased need for the development of high quality diversity training programs that can assist mainstreamed individuals and groups in urban areas to learn how to interact with and assist people from diverse cultural backgrounds in a culturally sensitive way. Such programs are especially important for administrators and professionals who are expected to lead a multicultural workforce. Without this preparation, efforts by mainstreamed individuals working in racially and ethnically diverse environments are likely to fail.

Programming Targeting Resource Poor Communities

For those residents of communities, without the income, prerequisite knowledge of the subject matter, transportation, childcare, or other required assets, the adult and continuing education system seems to have evolved a largely remedial effort that is funded primarily by third party payers, e.g., the federal, state, or local government, philanthropic sources, churches and others. Such programs are often designed to address the most salient needs of inner city residents. For example, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, the 1997 Welfare-to-Work program, and the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (Hayes, 1999) included provisions that provided for the funding of mostly remedial adult education programs to address the remedial learning needs of unemployed and underemployed adults, many of whom resided in inner-city communities.

However, Amstutz and Sheard (2000) state that many of the educational programs that are intended to serve inner-city residents are failing miserably. They argue that the socio-cultural, historical, and political marginalization of people of color, lower socioeconomic status workers, immigrants, the incarcerated, and the unemployed has often led to the development of programs that focus on redressing these individuals' deficits rather than on improving their strengths. Additionally, they observed that this marginalization is exacerbated by the fact that those who teach in many adult and/or vocational literacy programs are themselves marginalized due to their low salaries, lack of benefits, and temporary employment status.

To more effectively address the tremendous learning needs of inner-city communities, and assist the entire urban community to participate in the global economy, adult educators should become more intricately involved in the federal, state, and metropolitan policy arenas where decisions are made regarding the allocation of scarce resources for the education of these adults. Once the programs are funded, they should provide a safe space for learning. Not only should the learning environment be free of physical violence, but it should respect the learners' initial language, culture, dress, celebrations, and styles of interacting while assisting him/her to learn new ways of viewing the world. The instructional staff and teachers should be informed and informative. These individuals should be not only competent in their subject matter areas, but also knowledgeable and understanding of the daily experiences and learning obstacles faced by inner-city residents. The curriculum and instructional approaches of these programs should integrate the lived experiences of students (i.e., via case studies, metaphors, similes, analogies, etc.) with instructional content and subject matter that address the learning needs of inner-city learners.

Conclusion

Residents of inner-city communities face numerous context specific obstacles and barriers in their struggle to acquire quality educational programming that will assist them to develop the economic viability of their communities. Similarly, the urban context offers many challenges to adult educators seeking to deliver educational programs to the entire range of potential learners. There is a tremendous need for adult educators to take a proactive stance regarding the discriminatory practices that are endemic to urban areas. This will require the delivery of appropriate educational and training programs to mainstreamed individuals and communities around the sensitive topic of discriminatory behavior. For those in resource poor communities, the adult educator must rely on alternative funding sources to provide growth oriented programs, and develop culturally responsive adult education programming.

Reference will be provided upon request.

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